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PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN MINNESOTA AND USDA WILL RESTORE WETLANDS

\$4 million will help environmentally sensitive wetlands on more than 7,000 acres

SAINT PAUL, Minn., Oct. 25, 2004—Minnesota's application to become the second state in the nation to participate in the USDA's Wetlands Reserve Enhancement Program (WREP) has been approved officials announced today.

Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty and Agriculture Deputy Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment R. Mack Gray made the announcement during an event here to highlight the partnership that will accelerate the state's wetland restoration efforts.

"The pressure on Minnesota's water, wildlife and habitat requires our immediate action to defend this critical resource," said Governor Pawlenty. "The fact that the federal government has approved our plan shows that once again, Minnesota is leading the nation in wetland and habitat restoration."

"This partnership brings federal, state and local resources together to restore wetlands, provide habitat for wildlife and improve water quality," said Agriculture Secretary Ann M. Veneman. "This project supports President Bush's goal to restore, improve and protect an additional 3 million acres of environmentally sensitive wetlands."

Governor Pawlenty and the Minnesota Board of Water and Soil Resources (BWSR), in partnership with USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) State Conservationist Bill Hunt, submitted an application to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service earlier this month.

Through Minnesota's WREP plan, the state will provide \$1.2 million and USDA will provide \$2.8 million. The state portion of funding will come from funds previously appropriated by the legislature to BWSR for the Reinvest in Minnesota (RIM) Reserve program, which focuses on habitat restoration and protection, water quality enhancement, and water retention and storage. The application submitted by the state also indicated that Minnesota will develop a long-range wetlands restoration strategic plan in coordination with USDA.

The targeted restoration funds will focus on approximately 7,250 acres throughout Minnesota. Goals and regions include:

- 3,000 acres in the five Presidentially Declared Flood Disaster Counties of Dodge, Faribault, Freeborn, Mower, and Steele counties in southern Minnesota;
- 1,750 acres along the Red River of the North main stem;

- 1,500 acres in the Buffalo-Red River Watershed in northwestern; and,
- 1,000 acres in the Grand Marais Creek Subwatershed in northwestern Minnesota.

In the disaster counties, the program will target sites within the watersheds to achieve strategic flood storage in conjunction with water quality and wildlife benefits. The heavy rains in this area have had a significant impact on agriculture, transportation, and the city of Austin. WREP will help alleviate recurring flooding issues.

“Southeastern Minnesota has been hit hard by recent flood damage,” said Governor Pawlenty. “We have made it a priority to find ways to prevent flooding from occurring in the future and this is just one of many steps we will take to help prevent the problem.”

WREP is administered through a partnership between NRCS and BWSR. The program provides a voluntary opportunity for landowners to receive both financial and technical assistance to restore wetlands and increase wildlife habitat. Wetlands provide fish and wildlife habitat, act as a water quality filter, reduce flooding, recharge groundwater, and provide educational or recreational opportunities. WRP is a voluntary program that offers landowners the options of permanent easements, 30-year easements and restoration cost-share agreements to protect, restore or enhance wetlands on their property.

This announcement demonstrates USDA’s and Governor Pawlenty’s commitment to improve water quality. Other Minnesota efforts include a significant refocusing of clean water initiatives to maximize their value in watersheds with the most need, establishment of the State’s first-ever “Clean Water Cabinet” to make clean water a top priority of state government and the historic Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program (CREP) bonding proposal for the program’s second phase.

Additional information is available at www.governor.state.mn.us or <http://www.nrcs.usda>.

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